Transatlantica
Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2016
Ordinary Chronicles of the End of the World

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André Cabral de Almeida Cardoso

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8364
DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.8364
ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher
AFEA

Electronic reference
André Cabral de Almeida Cardoso, "Apocalypse and Sensibility: The Role of Sympathy in Jeff Lemire's *Sweet Tooth*", *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2016, Online since 14 September 2017, connection on 29 April 2021. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8364 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.8364

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Introduction

1 *Sweet Tooth*, Jeff Lemire's graphic narrative,[1] literally opens with a nightmare: Gus, its young protagonist, dreams he is running through the woods, haunted by the "cold eyes" of a "big man" who looks down at him; he knows he has to run as fast as he can, for behind him there is "fire and hell and bad stuff" (Lemire, *Sweet Tooth* 1: 7). This dream dramatically introduces the post-apocalyptic world outlined in the rest of the narrative: most of the population has been killed by a devastating plague, towns are either abandoned or littered with corpses, and the few survivors have mostly reverted to a savage predatory behavior. More peculiarly, though, all children born after the plague are human-animal hybrids who are immune to the disease that continues to infect the rest of the population. Gus is one of these children, a human and deer hybrid who lives with his father in a cabin hidden in an abandoned wilderness sanctuary in Nebraska. The woods are a sanctuary that protects Gus from the harshness of the outside world, but this haven proves to be fragile when, after his father's death, Gus is attacked by men who hunt hybrid children for money. He is rescued by Jepperd, the "big man" Gus had seen in his dream, who eventually becomes the boy's fervent protector as they travel to Alaska to investigate the origins of the plague and the mystery of Gus's birth (being nine years old, he was born *before* the plague hit, which should be impossible).

2 What is remarkable about the way this post-apocalyptic world is introduced in the first pages of *Sweet Tooth* is the consistent use of visual and narrative elements that engage the reader's empathy. The first panel of the narrative is a close-up of Gus's large, expressive eyes, and some of the following panels focus on either Gus's or his father's

tears. Gus's language is colloquial and clearly marked as that of a child, conveying his impressions in a naïve tone that promptly establishes his innocence ("fire and hell and bad stuff"). The use of a first-person narrative voice puts the reader in Gus's subjective position, creating the illusion that we have immediate access to his thoughts and emotions—at least at the level of the text. At the level of the images, however, Gus is represented from the outside. This raises important questions, to be addressed in the course of this essay, regarding the representation of inner thoughts and emotions in *Sweet Tooth*. At this point, it is enough to observe that interactions among the characters tend to rely on the display of their facial expressions and bodily postures, and the frequent use of silent panels highlights the option to communicate meaning (especially emotional states) through expressive images.

3 This paper argues that the question of empathy is one the fundamental themes of this narrative, and a concern that informs most of the formal choices that structure it. Gus and most of the other hybrid children in *Sweet Tooth* are singularly unsuitable to face the violence of the disintegrating world that surrounds them. Their fragility is closely connected to their ability to inspire empathy or to feel empathy for others. The aim of this paper is to discuss how empathy and the related notion of sympathy are dealt with in a narrative which depicts fictional worlds in which they seem to have no place at all.

Innocence, Hybridity and the Representation of Violence

4 Many of the formal and narrative devices employed in *Sweet Tooth* to engage the reader's empathy are part of a long literary tradition that goes back to the eighteenth century, and which have remained alive in more or less sporadic manner in melodrama and mass culture ever since. In *The Culture of Sensibility*, G. J. Barker-Benfield speaks of a culture of sensibility that influenced not only literature, but also philosophy, medicine, religion, and social behavior as a whole during most of the eighteenth century. A central concept in this culture was the notion of sympathy, which covers what we understand today as empathy, a term which only became current in the English language in the early twentieth century (Keen 39; 42). Sympathy involved not only an emotional engagement, but also a strong moral commitment which ideally would lead to an investigation of the causes of suffering (lending it a cognitive dimension) and to attempts at alleviating it. In the culture of sensibility, and especially in sentimental literature, the object of sympathy was also an object of scrutiny, since it was important to make sure he or she was worthy of attention and compassion. More than a victim of suffering, therefore, the ideal object of sympathy should also be virtuous, innocent, vulnerable and sensitive. Sympathy created an attachment that went beyond sharing feelings to sharing affinities and moral values; it offered itself as a model for sociability, as a fundamental factor in establishing social connections. Barker-Benfield points out that the promotion of social affections in the culture of sensibility led to the creation of a particular kind of relationship between writer and reader (226). Sympathetic identification with the typically female protagonist of sentimental fiction helped create the sensation that the reader belonged to a larger community of feeling which stood in opposition to an uncaring world, usually represented by the city, ruled by false appearances, economic ambition, power struggles and social hierarchies. *Sweet Tooth* creates a similar relationship of sympathetic identification between reader and

protagonist, and, in doing so, reproduces the opposition between a community of feeling, centered on the protagonist, and the rest of the world, seen as essentially hostile.

5 Hence, while in most dystopias the protagonist "is always already *in* the world in question, unreflectively immersed in the society" (Baccolini and Moylan 5), in *Sweet Tooth* Gus is initially protected from the rest of the world in the wilderness sanctuary. This is a common feature of sentimental literature, in which the protagonist is usually raised in isolation, away from the corrupting influence of the world and unaware of its transactions. The departure from the protected environment of childhood is the event that initiates narrative development in sentimental fiction, as is also the case of *Sweet Tooth*.

6 In the image of the sanctuary, nature and childhood come together as symbols of Gus's innocence. As Jeff Lemire himself points out in an interview to *Entertainment Weekly*, this is a central aspect of the character, since Gus and the other hybrid children in *Sweet Tooth* are meant to represent

> the innocence of childhood. When you're a kid, you're not as corrupted by the world at large. You're not corrupted by prejudices. You're much more open-minded. Much more interested in the world around you. *Sweet Tooth* is about the world returning to that kind of place. (Lemire, "The End of *Sweet Tooth*," n. pag.)

7 The nature reserve represents "that kind of place" of innocence to which the world is supposed to return, a promise *Sweet Tooth* fulfills at the end of the narrative when Gus establishes a new utopian community there with his friends and allies. The demarcation of this preserved space, however, creates a tension in the symbolic structure of *Sweet Tooth*, since the drive towards hybridization, manifested most clearly in the figure of the hybrid children themselves, is overlaid with a search for the preservation of purity, for isolation, reproducing the logic of sentimental fiction, in which the individual must be protected from the contamination of the outside world. To a certain extent, the fluidity implied in the notion of hybridization, with its rejection of stable categories, is arrested by the fixation on nature and childhood.

8 After Gus has already been forced to leave his sanctuary, and has escaped from an attack by a violent motorcycle gang, he has a dream in which Disney-like animals (a deer and a rabbit) urge him to return to the safety of the woods in order to avoid contact with more "bad men" (1: 64-65). The connection between Gus and nature, however, has already been established in the first pages of *Sweet Tooth*, where we often see Gus wandering alone in the woods. It is there that he sees a stag, just after he has buried his father, who died from the plague. This brief encounter with a purified version of himself (the stag seems to represent a purely natural version of Gus, devoid of his human aspects) is interrupted when the animal is killed by a bullet shot by hunters who had entered the sanctuary to capture the boy—in fact, they had shot the stag thinking it was Gus himself (1: 22-24). This episode signals the intrusion of violence in Gus's protected home, and is a graphic illustration of the danger not only to his life, but also to his childlike innocence.

9 In the introduction to *Moral Blindness*, Leonidas Donskis declares that "[e]vil is not confined to war or totalitarian ideologies. Today it more frequently reveals itself in failing to react to someone else's suffering, in refusing to understand others, in insensitivity and in eyes turned away from a silent ethical gaze" (Bauman and Donskis 9). The scene of the killing of the stag brings to the fore precisely the demand for this

"silent ethical gaze" as it focuses on the stag's eyes at the moment of its death, and then on one of its eyes, which stares at the reader as the animal lies dead at Gus's feet. The eye of the stag still interrogates the readers even after its death, appealing to their pity and their sense of justice, not to mention their anxiety concerning Gus's safety, establishing a chain of identification that involves the readers, the boy and the animal. This mechanism of sympathetic identification through the gaze is established in the panels immediately preceding the death of the stag, which are a close-up first of Gus's eyes as he stares at the stag, and then of the stag's eyes as it stares back at Gus.

10 A similar dynamics of the gaze is already present at the moment in which a connection is established between Gus and Jepperd. This is represented by a sequence of three panels that extend to the full length of the page, shifting from a close-up of Jepperd's still "cold" eyes, to Gus's large, scared eyes, and back to Jepperd's, which reveal amazement and surprise. As Mark Heimermann notes, this is the moment when Jepperd sees Gus's humanity through his expressive eyes (245). It is the spectacle of Gus's fragility that causes a change in Jepperd's attitude towards the boy, for the previous image on the same page is a large panel showing Jepperd threateningly grabbing Gus by his antlers. This is a turning point in the narrative, since, as the reader learns later, Jepperd was himself a hunter hired to bring Gus to a lab which is running experiments on the hybrid children.

Figure 1

Sweet Tooth, vol. 1, p. 36
SWEET TOOTH © Jeff Lemire. VERTIGO and all characters, the distinctive likenesses thereof and all related elements are trademarks of DC Comics.

11 The appeal to this dynamics of the gaze is an instance of the attempt to engage the reader's empathetic identification with the protagonist that Maria Varsam sees as a central element of dystopian fiction (205-206). The insistence with which this device is

employed organizes the relationships among the different characters and orients the reader's response to the narrative as a whole by stressing the act of seeing and the moral reactions it entails.

12 In the images of *Sweet Tooth*, eyes frequently stare back at the reader, often filled with tears, always emotional, always concerned, endlessly attempting to reproduce the "silent ethical gaze" Donskis calls for. What these eyes see is a sustained spectacle of suffering. Mangled and bloody bodies, as well as bodies riddled by disease, are often displayed in *Sweet Tooth*, forming *tableaux* that are given a prominent position on the page. The post-apocalyptic setting of the narrative offers frequent occasions for these displays, which act as one of its structuring devices.

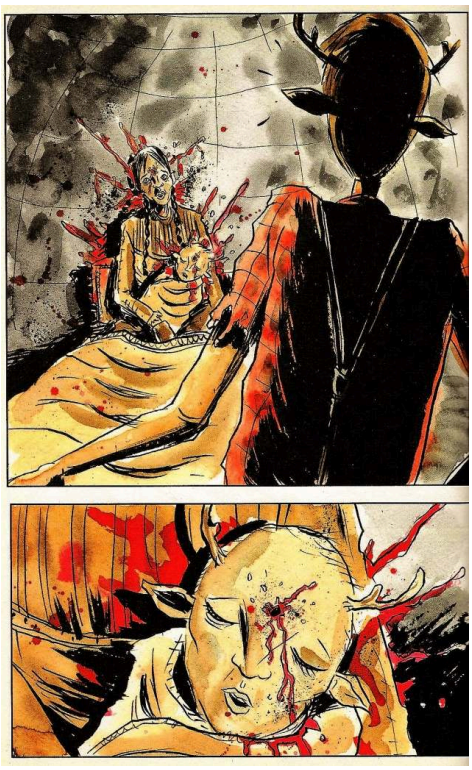

Figure 2

Sweet Tooth, vol. 4, p. 148

13 As David Marshall points out, relying on Adam Smith's famous description of the operation of sympathy in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*,[2] sympathy depends on "people's ability to represent themselves as tableaux, spectacles, and texts before others" (5). If, however, the spectacle of suffering is essential to create the effect of sympathy, this entails some risks. Since the gaze is the central means to establish contact not only between the characters in the narrative, but also between the readers and the characters, there remains the question of what precisely the gaze reveals. As mentioned before, the use of a first-person narrative voice in many passages of *Sweet Tooth* creates the illusion that we have immediate access to the characters' inner thoughts, while the visual representation of the characters always shows them from the outside. Several formal devices are frequently used in *Sweet Tooth* in order to counteract the potential distancing effect that this external view of the characters

might create. Some images are positioned in a way that mimics Gus's point of view, as when an adult character is shown as if being seen from below. The frequently represented intense facial expressions also act as the immediate signs of emotion, often accompanied by an even more unequivocal indication of internal suffering in the form of tears.

14 But while these manifestations of emotion rely heavily on the act of gazing, the representation of the gaze itself reveals the limitations of this expressive form of representation, since although the images approximate Gus's point of view, we never fully see the world through his eyes. Besides, the very intensity with which the gaze is represented in *Sweet Tooth*, with the constant repetition of staring eyes which occupy whole panels from which the rest of the face is excluded, points to something that remains without representation. For what exactly do these staring eyes say? They demand the readers' sympathetic engagement, and they are able to move us, but it is often hard to interpret them with any precision. When Gus stares at the stag, for instance, he is obviously astonished, but does he feel fear or recognition, or some sort of identification with the animal? And when the stag stares back, is the animal threatening or afraid, or does it also feel some sort of identification with the hybrid boy? What seems to be at stake here is the act of gazing itself as a means of contact rather than the precise nature of the contact established. When this contact is brutally interrupted by the stag being killed in front of Gus, the eyes of the animal as it dies and then as it lies dead on the floor still demand a reaction from the reader (and from Gus), one of horrors in witnessing this instance of senseless violence. They demand and already represent Donskis's "silent ethical gaze." But ultimately, this gaze is empty, for it comes from a dead animal. The reciprocity of the gaze is interrupted, and the staring eyes become a blank screen on which the spectators project their own feelings. To a greater or lesser degree, this is the risk which attends the representation of the gaze throughout the narrative of *Sweet Tooth*.

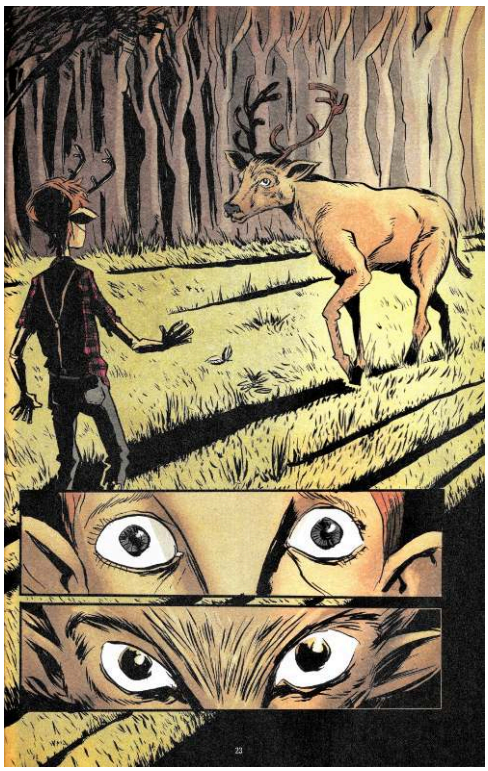

Figure 3

Sweet Tooth, vol. 1, pp. 23-24

15 But there are also risks involved in the object of the gaze. As Karen Halttunen argues, the "literary scenario of suffering, which made ethics a matter of viewing the pain of another, from the outset lent itself to an aggressive kind of voyeurism in which the spectator identified not just with the sufferings of the virtuous victim but with the cruelty of her or his tormentor" (304). Hence, while pain, in its many literary representations, could be seen as obscene, it could also be seductive and exciting (Halttunen 318). This risk is certainly present in *Sweet Tooth*, which offers its depiction of a dangerous decaying world as an action-packed adventure. As a blurb from *USA Today* printed on the cover of the first volume of the collected series promises, "SWEET TOOTH is Mad Max with antlers." Much of the suffering in *Sweet Tooth* derives from fight scenes which depict in graphic detail violent attacks against the integrity of the body. The way the images of the narrative highlight these attacks, zooming in on them, establishes an aesthetics of sensationalism which creates the paradoxical effect of both indulging in the excitement of violence and displaying a pain meant to become an object of horror and empathy.

16 For Susan Sontag, images of suffering have a special power: "Photographs lay down routes of reference, and serve as totems of causes: sentiment is more likely to crystalize around a photograph than around a verbal slogan" (76). Although the subject of Sontag's essay is war photography, much of her argument also applies to the images in *Sweet Tooth*. Lemire's narrative is embedded in the experience of being constantly exposed to images of suffering which Sontag sees as typical of modern culture, "in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value" (2004,

20). Such excess, and the excessive representation of violence in particular, is a characteristic of comics as a medium (Gaboury n. pag.). It could be argued that this is especially true of Vertigo, the imprint of DC Comics under which *Sweet Tooth* was published. Julia Round calls attention to the importance of the Vertigo imprint in reshaping American comics in the early 1990s by redefining their aesthetics and by appealing to a more mature audience. The strategy of collecting material originally published in monthly installments in the form of graphic novels, for instance, imbued the Vertigo product with a sense of permanence, adding to it a higher production value, bringing it closer to the notion of a literary text and facilitating its commercialization in bookstores, profoundly altering the perception the general public had of comics. An important element in this transformation was a revolt against the strictures imposed by the Comics Code, the internal censorship guidelines that had regulated the publication of comics since the 1950s, and its limiting influence over writers' and artists' self-expression and creativity (Lopes 111). This emphasis on violence and even monstrosity was a direct attack against the Comics Code, as well as the use of narrative strategies borrowed from the pulps and Gothic literature (Lopes 111-113; Dony n. pag.). As Christophe Dony argues, "Vertigo comics' intertextual engaging with the pulp tradition revolves around the exploring of genre boundaries, 'cheap thrills,' and provocative as well as exploitative storytelling techniques," in an attempt to distinguish the imprint not only from mainstream comics, but also from the tradition of alternative comics. Focusing on violence, "Vertigo comics not only acknowledge the populist and sensational origins of comic books, but also ironically play with and comment on the 'low-brow' status marker that is often associated with the pulp tradition" (Dony n. pag.). The presence of violence in the Vertigo imprint, then, is part of an attempt to criticize—or indeed abolish—the Comics Code, but also to create an editorial identity and to situate it within a broader cultural tradition. It is a marketing strategy, as well, which helps present Vertigo comics as being targeted to a mature (and therefore more respectable) audience, at the same time that it preserves its sensational aspects as a form of appeal to a wider public.

17 In occupying a somewhat ambiguous space between mainstream and alternative comics, between low-brow "thrills" and high-brow literary status, the Vertigo imprint in general, and *Sweet Tooth* in particular, destabilize formal classifications and reading practices. As Katherine Kelp-Stebbins points out,

> *Sweet Tooth* is concurrently a single issue, comic series and graphic novel, challenging the identitarian politics involved in each designation. U.S. comic book fans can buy new issues every month at speciality shops, while libraries and bookstores shelve new *Sweet Tooth* graphic novels bi-annually. *Sweet Tooth*'s collection into graphic novel form may not bridge any high art/low art divide, but it does produce variegated readership demographics, from fanboys to the *New York Times* subscribers. (Kelp-Stebbins 338)

18 For Kelp-Stebbins, then, the theme of hybridity in *Sweet Tooth* finds an echo in its hybrid form. Its narrative is fluid, in that it could be lengthened or shortened according to its commercial success, apparently open-ended in the shape of monthly installments, but finally contained when collected in book form. It is difficult to ascertain exactly how its division into issues, volumes, pages or panels influences its content, and what the precise boundaries of these divisions are (Kelp-Stebbins 338-339). Lemire himself remarks that he had an idea of how *Sweet Tooth* would end when he pitched the story to Vertigo/DC Comics, while "the middle part (...) was rather fluid," and it "changed and

grew as we went along" ("The End of *Sweet Tooth*" n. pag.). This form has a bearing on the representation of violence in *Sweet Tooth*, which is also fluid or hybrid: it retains its appeal as a sensational object of consumption, following the editorial and marketing strategies of the Vertigo imprint, while it is inserted into a more coherent narrative project structured around a sentimental discourse centered on the notion of sympathy.

The Creation of Sympathy and the Effort of Purification

19 Susan Keen contrasts sympathy and empathy in her *Empathy and the Novel*. Empathy is defined as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect" provoked by witnessing, hearing or reading about another's emotional state; for Keen, empathy is an emotional and biological phenomenon, a reaction triggered by neurons wired to mirror the emotions of others (4). Sympathy, on the other hand, is "differentiated feeling for another"; in other words, sympathy is not the internal reproduction of the same emotion another is supposed to be feeling, but a distinct reaction to this emotion, and its nature is essentially moral (Keen 4-5). Empathy would involve feeling a certain degree of pain when watching someone suffer; sympathy, on the other hand, would involve feeling pity, for instance, in the same situation. While empathy may cause personal distress in the observer, and therefore is self-oriented and aversive, sympathy is other-oriented, and often associated with altruistic action (Keen 4). One of the risks involved in the representation of violence in *Sweet Tooth* has to do precisely with the potential failure of moving satisfactorily from empathy to sympathy. Since empathy is less morally grounded than sympathy, it is possible to be empathetically caught up in the thrill of inflicting violence rather than in the pain caused by violence—especially when the character inflicting violence is presented in a positive light as one of the "good guys," thus inviting identification from the readers (see figure 4). It is also important to go beyond the fascination with the image of violence itself, of its merely sensational aspect, in order to elicit the proper sympathetic response. In figure 4, three points are highlighted in red circles, forming a triangle that frames the whole image. These show specific instances of violent contact in the fight, directing the readers' gaze in order to stress the pain that the blows, cuts and perforations cause through their intensified representation. Pain, therefore, dominates the scene without erasing the excitement of the fight itself, thus establishing the initial conditions for the creation of empathy with both Jepperd and one of his attackers. Further formal strategies will be necessary to guarantee the establishment of sympathy.

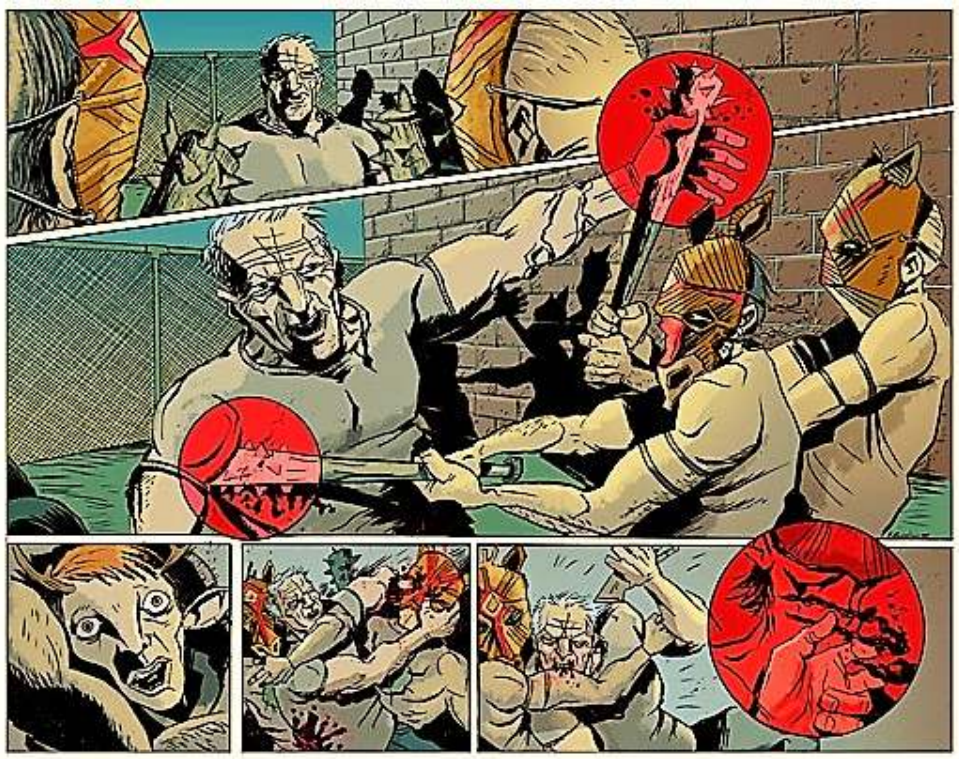

Figure 4

Sweet Tooth, vol. 1, p. 48-49

20 If, for Sontag, images impact and haunt us, it is only narrative that gives us the ability to understand by fully creating meaning (80). Therefore, it is the insertion of an image within a narrative, or the creation of a narrative around an image, that may lead to an ethical, compassionate reaction from the spectator. If the images of suffering in *Sweet Tooth* promote the excitement of violence, on the other hand they are part of a narrative that tries to control the way they are read. A common device employed in *Sweet Tooth* in order to do so is the introduction of the figure of a witness. These witnesses help guide the reader's response by already representing the expected reactions to scenes of violence or atrocity. Hence, in Figure 4, the expression of shock and horror in Gus's eyes offers a template for the reader, something especially important in this scene, in which Jepperd takes up the role of a traditional action hero. This image, then, is not just about the thrill of the action, it is also representative of the dynamics of the gaze that informs much of the narrative of *Sweet Tooth*. Gus's horrified gaze already guides the reaction expected from the reader when confronted with violence, but it also turns Gus himself into an object of pity. In *Sweet Tooth*, the sympathy of the reader is frequently divided between sympathy for the victims of violence and sympathy for the characters who witness it (and who are usually sympathetic spectators themselves). The intensity with which the act of gazing is represented emphasizes its centrality in the way the world is perceived, and it also reminds the readers that they themselves are involved witnesses. Gus's placement in figure 4 symbolizes this position of an involved witness: he appears in a panel in the left-hand corner of the page, outside the fight and the triangle formed by the three red

circles that frame it, but still grabbed by one of the attackers and forced to watch, so that he is involved in the fight without being a direct participant in it.

21 That this dynamics of the gaze plays an important structuring role in the narrative of *Sweet Tooth* becomes obvious in a flashback sequence which appears in an issue drawn not by Jeff Lemire, but by guest artist Matt Kindt. Here we witness the massacre of an Eskimo tribe by a group of British sailors. The sequence culminates in a panel which shows a native woman being shot by the side of her infant baby—a hybrid child, like Gus:

Figure 5

Sweet Tooth, vol. 5, p. 64

22 The infant looks at his mother as she is killed, and cries, while the mother stares at the reader at the moment when she is shot. Again, the baby's tears offer a template for the reader's reaction, while the mother's gaze engages the reader directly. As in figure 4, the reader's sympathy is divided between victim and witness. The image also echoes the sequence of Gus's meeting with the stag, and the mother's gaze seems to similarly interrogate the reader. Like the stag's dead eyes, however, hers remain enigmatic, hinting at something that stays hidden behind them; they once again act as a screen on which the readers can project their own feelings.

23 Gus plays an important role in the attempt to control the way the representation of violence is read in *Sweet Tooth*, acting either as a privileged witness to atrocities or as potential—or actual—victim of violence. His fragility, his obvious inadequacy to face the violent post-apocalyptic world in which he lives, paradoxically becomes a tool for survival, as it helps him obtain protection and garner allies in his journey. For R. F.

Brissenden, the virtuous heroes and heroines of sentimental novels were "*necessarily* weak," which guaranteed that they would elicit the reader's sympathy; at the same time, although they were often defeated in their struggles against a corrupt and uncaring world, they managed to maintain their moral integrity even in this defeat, which turned into a sort of triumph (91). The theme of virtue in distress, therefore, posited the existence of a "free (and essentially moral) individual" in conflict with social conventions that threatened to crush him or her (Brissenden 135).

24 As a modern update of the sentimental hero, Gus is faced by a social world in which violence is even more blatant, and the collapse of social institutions has led brutality to be the rule. The emergence of the theme of virtue in distress, however, re-inscribes the protagonist's fight for survival as a moral conflict in which the most important values are innocence and the capacity to feel sympathy. This becomes especially clear in specific situations of conflict in which the main characters' moral integrity runs the risk of being compromised. When Gus is forced to kill an alligator-boy when he and other hybrid children are trying to escape from the lab, this act of aggression is mitigated by the fact that the alligator-boy was attacking one of Gus's friends. The girl is shown defenseless and crying, yet another image of suffering and fragility, so that Gus is actually acting out of his sympathy for her. The killing itself promptly turns into an opportunity to display the characters' compassion, as the girl herself feels pity for her attacker: "He—he was just a little animal kid like us. Probably scared. Thought we were gonna hurt him" (3: 64-66). Later, Gus uses almost the same words when he recounts the incident to Jepperd, the requisite tears in his eyes: "He was just scared... Didn't know any better and I killed him. [...] [I]t just makes me feel so bad. I don't ever wanna kill no one ever again." Jepperd's reassuring response to Gus reinforces his intention of protecting not only the boy, but also the boy's innocence: "Kid... I promise you... As long as we're together, you won't have'ta kill anyone ever again" (4: 132).

25 But Gus's innocence seems to run deeper, and to be inscribed in his own body. As pointed out above, throughout the narrative, the hybrids are consistently identified with innocence, since they bring together two of its most important symbols: childhood and the natural world. They represent an intrusion of nature in the human world, and their childlike naïveté is constantly stressed. If, as Mary Douglas argues, the notion of pollution is attached to objects that contradict established classifications and blur the boundaries between distinct categories (45-50), then the hybrid is a particularly clear symbol of impurity. At a certain level, hybridity in *Sweet Tooth* confirms this idea, with its confusion of human and animal, or culture and nature, destabilizing representation. On the other hand, since it is also associated with the innocence of the children, it paradoxically becomes a sign of purity. The confusion of boundaries involved in hybridity has yet another important function in *Sweet Tooth*, for it also acts as a way to promote sympathy. The hybrids are sufficiently similar to us to facilitate our identification with them, but they also assume the aspect of safer objects of compassion: children and animals.[3] They emerge as privileged objects of sympathy in *Sweet Tooth* precisely because they are detached from the world of cruelty, exploitation and moral compromise of the adults.

26 The connection between purity and hybridity is further complicated by the fact that the latter is caused by the contagious disease that has killed most of the world population and continues to victimize humans. Contagion itself brings to the fore the notion of impurity, but in *Sweet Tooth* it also destabilizes the notion of a self-contained

identity. In its most dystopian aspects, it does so in the image of piles of bodies abandoned in deserted cities, which effaces the distinction between individuals by fusing them in a single mass, and in the erasure of personal traits by the ravages of the disease, the uniform wasting away of infected bodies covered by pustules and skin rashes. On the other hand, it evokes a whole range of contemporary discourses which postulate a fluid form of identity in which the autonomous individual is replaced by a network of connections and the human merges with other categories. As Scott Bukatman argues, these discourses, which have become pervasive in contemporary culture, manifesting themselves most explicitly in science fiction, point to a desire to transcend the human. It may be useful, then, to understand the representation of contagion and hybridity in *Sweet Tooth* in the context of two opposite discourses—a discourse based on the creation of binary categories typical of modernity and a discourse based on multiplicity and the explosion of categories—an opposition outlined in the work of Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour.

27 The hybrid children in *Sweet Tooth* could be seen as a biological manifestation of the actual hybridization of categories that the classifications of modernity, according to Latour (7-22), try to deny, or as an avatar of Haraway's cyborg. Their association with contagion, however, suggests an analogy with Elana Gomel's concept of the apocalyptic body. According to Gomel, apocalyptic fictions present a double-edged vision of the end: on the one hand, they linger on pain and suffering, but their ultimate object is "an image of purity so absolute that it denies the organic messiness of life" (405). The apocalyptic body arises from this tension; like Haraway's cyborg, it is perverse and unstable, rejecting any fixed category (Gomel 406). It finds its manifestation in *Sweet Tooth* not only in the bodies of the sick, but also in the hybrid bodies of the children, the final products of the disease. For Gomel, in apocalyptic fiction, pestilence is a means to separate the condemned from those destined to salvation in the new millennial order, yet it remains ambiguous: "[s]ince everybody is a potential victim, the line between the pure and the impure can never be drawn with any precision" (Gomel 406). But despite its fascination with paradoxes, the narrative of *Sweet Tooth* is careful to eliminate this particular ambiguity: the human adults are all condemned to die from the disease, while the post-human, hybrid children are preserved. Contagion acts as a clear means of purification.

28 And so does suffering. As Elana Gomel argues, the apocalyptic body is "most of all [...] a suffering body, a text written in the script of stigmata, scars, wounds, and sores," and it is through suffering that this body, and society as a whole, is transformed, bringing in new utopian possibilities (406). The humans who fall prey to the disease are also an object of sympathy in *Sweet Tooth*, especially when the victim is one of Gus's protectors. They represent the price to be paid for the establishment of a new order, just as the suffering of the hybrid children exposed to the violence of the adult world represents its justification. By acting as instruments of purification, disease and suffering imply the expurgation of the guilt that lies at the very origins of the plague.

The Guilt of Modernity

29 Of particular interest is the flashback sequence drawn by Matt Kindt. Set in 1911, it tells the story of James Thacker, a British naturalist heading to Alaska in search of Louis, his sister's fiancé, who has joined a group of Christian missionaries who were trying to

convert the Eskimos. This colonial enterprise proves to be disastrous, for by the time Thacker reaches the Eskimo village where Louis was headed, the missionaries have all been killed by a mysterious disease, and Louis, far from converting the Eskimos, has himself adopted their culture and married a local girl. Louis explains that in the previous spring he had wandered away from a hunting party and found a cave filled with stone cabinets with strange markings on their doors. Opening one of these cabinets, Louis was surprised to find what appeared to be the skeleton of a man with the head of a deer. Before he could investigate any further, he was dragged away by his fellow huntsmen and taken back to the village. There, he learned that he had stumbled into the tomb of the gods, a sacred place which no one but the shaman was allowed to enter. Punishment for this trespass was swift to follow: the next spring, Louis's wife gave birth to a human-deer hybrid, a re-incarnation of the god Louis had found, and both the missionaries and the Eskimos began to succumb to the plague. "Tekkietsertok has returned to purify the world," Louis tells Thacker. "Man's time here is almost over. We are not worthy of this place. Soon the world will be returned to the animals... *the innocents*" (5: 52; emphasis in the original). Appalled by Louis's conversion to paganism and by his hybrid child, which he sees as an aberration, Thacker retreats, only to come back a couple of days later with the rest of his expedition. Seeing himself as an agent of God fighting against native superstition, he decimates the whole tribe, taking Louis with him as his prisoner. Before they can reach England again, however, they die from the disease, together with the whole crew of the ship.

30 Structured as fragments of Thacker's personal journal, the beginning of the flashback sequence echoes the first pages of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, where we also find the account of a voyager involved in an expedition to the Arctic circle, with similar longings for the stable, middle-class order left behind in England, and excitement (mixed with some anxiety) about the ability of science to make sense of a largely unknown territory. It also evokes the diaries Darwin wrote during his own expeditions, especially in those moments in which Thacker presents himself as a naturalist fascinated by the specimens he has collected along his way, and wondering about the new species he may find at his final destination (5: 7-9). His work as a taxidermist reveals his vision of nature as a vast repository of species to be collected, catalogued and stored—a vision encapsulated in the image of Thacker toiling in his cabin among stuffed fish and birds arranged as a museum exhibition. Science emerges as a form of control and domination, while nature becomes lifeless, reduced to objects for acquisition. Thacker's attachment to religion is a means to reinforce his representation as a typical Victorian subject, but it also participates in the establishment of clear categories set in binary opposition: civilization versus savagery, reason versus superstition. By evoking foundational texts of both science fiction and the natural sciences, Thacker's account points to the consolidation of scientific discourse during the long nineteenth century and its connection with colonial expansion, the increasing dominance of instrumental reason and the acquisitive logic of capitalism—in other words, the consolidation of modernity itself. The massacre of the Eskimos functions as a demonstration of the violence involved in this process.

Figure 6

Sweet Tooth, vol. 5, p. 66

31 The sequence of the massacre activates in concentrated form the formal devices employed in the rest of *Sweet Tooth* to elicit sympathy from the readers, reproducing the aesthetics of the war photographs discussed by Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. The Eskimo village is presented as yet another sheltered space of purity, especially in its connection to nature, and the primitivism of its pre-modern culture points to a state of original innocence, the civilizational equivalent of childhood. Indeed, it is the violation of this culture and of the integrity of its members that the depiction of the massacre condemns. But order is restored in the last pages of *Sweet Tooth*, with the foundation of a community of hybrids. Here, appeals to the primitive can also be found in the apparent lack of sophisticated technology, in the tribal organization of society and in the fact that Gus establishes this community in the woods where he spent his childhood. This "return" to innocence further reinforces the opposition to the techno-scientific order of modernity. As we learn in the last volume of *Sweet Tooth*, the new outbreak of the plague—now on a global scale—was occasioned by an even more drastic invasion of the sacred space of the gods by biopolitical power. A U.S. army research base had been built near the old site of the Eskimo village, the tombs of the ancient gods had been unearthed, and a laboratory had been built within the cave itself in order to clone the bodies found there. Gus was the first of these clones, grown in an artificial womb.

32 The project of modernity, with its attempts at technological control and its assertion of categories that justify exploitation (civilization dominating the primitive, science dominating nature, the powerful dominating the powerless), is seen as a kind of hubris.

It is fundamentally uncaring and utilitarian, while the utopian society that succeeds it is conciliatory and sympathetic. Conciliation is marked by the hybrid bodies themselves, which re-establish the harmony between man and nature. And while Thacker's expedition has exterminated those he considered to be opposed to himself, the hybrid community founded by Gus is cemented by a final act of compassion. Forced into a war with hostile humans, Gus interrupts the conflict by urging the humans to let the hybrids take care of them as they succumb to the plague:

> And this is a story of compassion. This is a story of how the last humans stopped fighting and came to the hybrids not as enemies... but rather as refugees. This is the story of how the hybrids *let* go of fear and hatred. And, despite being hunted and hated themselves [...] still helped mankind in their *final passage* out of this world. (Lemire, *Sweet Tooth* 6: 188; emphasis in the original)

33 As in most utopian and post-apocalyptic fiction, the establishment of utopia in *Sweet Tooth* depends on the violent destruction of a previous social order. The community of the hybrids, however, is spared the guilt of carrying out this destruction by the intervention of the plague, which is partly caused by the undue interference of science over nature, but also by the intervention of a divine power intent on restoring the purity of a primordial order. The hybrids represent the conciliatory redemption of these basically destructive forces. Sympathy, then, emerges as the moral foundation for a humanitarian order which sidesteps political conflict, safely left behind with the erasure of human society—a wish-fulfilling escape from the guilt of modernity.

34 In presenting a utopian order based on the bonds formed by sympathy, *Sweet Tooth* suggests that utopia depends on transcending not only modernity, but also humanity itself. Its post-human hybrids are freed from the drive towards control and domination, and are the focus of sympathy in the narrative, both as its objects and as the ones most equipped to feel compassion for others. They are idealized embodiments of tenderness and sensitivity, qualities that Brazilian psychoanalyst Maria Rita Kehl sees at the same time as intrinsic to the human and as a product of humanity: humans are not necessarily sensitive, so tenderness must be preserved and cultivated; it is an objective to be achieved so that we can attain our full humanity (Kehl 453). Kehl insists on the ethical value of tenderness as a means to restrain the expansion of modern capitalist power and its utilitarian view of social relations, and to preserve what lies outside this logic of domination (461). The hybrids in *Sweet Tooth*, then, represent the imaginary fulfillment of the human, rather than its denial, and the accomplishment of the ethical function of tenderness.

Conclusion

35 For Paul Ricœur, sympathy is the basis for an ethical commitment to the other. But its dynamics are also an important factor in the formation of the self, which is always structured in relation to the other. According to Ricœur, sympathy establishes a real interchange between the self and the other, which overcomes the power imbalance implied in the spectacle of suffering. If the sufferer is powerless, while the observer retains a greater capacity to act, the sufferer imparts to the observer his or her own fragility, and the observer is affected by everything that pertains to the sufferer. In recognizing the fragility of the other through sympathetic identification, the observer acknowledges his or her own fragility—and ultimately, his or her own mortality. It is this recognition of mutual fragility that restores the fundamental equality between the

sufferer and the observer. The solicitude involved in the orientation of sympathy towards the other also encompasses the perception that the other is irreplaceable, and the transference of this feeling to ourselves leads to the awareness that our own life is equally irreplaceable (Ricœur 222-226).

36 It is not hard to find in this account of the dynamics of sympathy a formulation of the modern individual as unique and irreplaceable, whose being must be protected at all costs precisely because of its fragility in the social body. Neither is it surprising that the origins of this formulation can be traced back to the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility, which flourished in a period that saw the consolidation of the modern bourgeois individual. Ricœur's appeal to the power of sympathy to overcome otherwise irreconcilable differences points to a belief in a universal humanism that has its roots in the Enlightenment. It also presupposes the call for more tolerant social relations based on the ethical value of tenderness and sensibility. The emergence in recent years of narratives such as *Sweet Tooth*, and of a range of critical discourses revolving (directly or indirectly) around the concept of sympathy, shows that this idea of humanism remains appealing, even at a time in which the concept of the modern individual, and of the human itself, seems to be in question. Certain aspects of the post-human and its connection to a fluid notion of the self, then, far from representing a radical break, are the later stages in the ongoing project to construct the individual and define its relation to society.

37 Hybridity itself becomes ambiguous in *Sweet Tooth*, a hybrid notion in its own right. On the one hand, it acts as an image for personal communication and mutual influence. According to Lemire, his vision of the relationship between Gus and Jepperd implied that the boy would absorb some of Jepperd's toughness in order to survive in a violent world, while Jepperd would absorb Gus's capacity for compassion: "We have this idea of hybrids throughout the book, and I wanted to end in this place where Gus had become a hybrid of both of them, of himself and Jepperd" ("The End of *Sweet Tooth*" n. pag.). In Lemire's vision, hybridity absorbs the kind of exchange and mutual identification involved in sympathy, in which the individual is formed in relation to the other. This individual is in permanent construction, a version of the subject in eternal becoming suggested by Deleuze and Guattari as a kind of utopian dream in *Mille Plateux*, a subject who is also in constant change through contact with the world, and, through that contact, absorbs and becomes one with the world. Such an individual, like a camouflaged fish, blends with his surroundings by reproducing its traits, and becomes like everyone else by sending lines through which he finds a continuation in the other with whom he is conjoined (Deleuze and Guattari, 342-343).

38 This image is particularly pertinent to *Sweet Tooth*, not only because of its articulation of sympathy, but also because its hybrids restore the harmony between humanity and nature. On the other hand, the paradoxical association of hybridity with purity, the demarcation of a protected space isolated from the ravages of a dystopian or post-apocalyptic world, which carries to the extreme the opposition between a morally innocent individual and the corruption of modern society central to the sentimental logic that *Sweet Tooth* adopts, reinstates the integrity of the individual. The post-apocalyptic setting of *Sweet Tooth* presents a situation of crisis in which the value of sympathy and innocence emerge triumphant, together with the individual on which they are based. For while the utopian society of the hybrids that is glimpsed in the final pages of the narrative reinforces the importance of communal bonds, especially in

terms of mutual solidarity, the kind of sympathy on which it depends still has its source in the individual. It is a personal characteristic of the hybrids, whose bodies physically represent their ability to establish a relation with the other by bridging the gap between the human and the animal.

39 Hybridity, then, acts as a kind of image for sympathy itself, symbolically connecting it to nature in its appropriation of the figure of the animal, while its artificiality is made manifest in the ambiguous origins of the hybrid children, poised between the intervention of an elemental deity and the interference of human science. Even though *Sweet Tooth* seems to rely on sympathy as a natural reaction to scenes of distress, its effects are carefully constructed by the narrative itself, especially in its manipulation of the dynamics of the gaze and its presentation of suffering as a spectacle.

40 The post-apocalyptic setting of *Sweet Tooth*, then, far from blocking the possibility of sympathy, offers the conditions for its manifestation by presenting situations of crisis in which sympathy can be most emphatically represented. However, the final illegibility of the gaze as it is represented in the narrative shows the limitations of sympathy as a means to go beyond the self and establish an actual communication with the other. This points to an ideological contradiction in the narrative of *Sweet Tooth*. The centrality of the gaze implies that the solution to social conflicts depends on an individual change of perspective, on the development of the personal ability to see the world—and the other—with sympathetic eyes. The apocalypse, which destroys the order of modernity and reveals the fragility of the individual, actually reinforces the importance of the self and offers the imaginary possibility of the creation of a protected space where the individual remains intact and incorruptible.

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NOTES

1. *Sweet Tooth* was originally published in the United States by Vertigo, an imprint of DC Comics, in monthly installments from 2010 to 2013. References are to the paperback collection published in six volumes from 2010 to 2013.

2. "[a]s we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. [...] It is the impressions of our senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy." (Smith 3-4)

3. Heimermann makes a similar point, but he stresses the children's animalistic aspect as something that marks them as Other, allowing them to be exploited as guinea pigs while we are led to sympathize with them *despite* their animal traits (240-241 ; 244-246).

ABSTRACTS

In Jeff Lemire's graphic narrative *Sweet Tooth*, the reader is faced with a world in dissolution. The cause for world-wide disaster, a deadly disease, is a traditional element of dystopian fiction. What is more unusual about *Sweet Tooth* is that its protagonist seems particularly ill-suited to face the challenges that confront him in a violent post-apocalyptic world, either because he is too sensitive or because he is too vulnerable. The question Lemire raises in creating this character is whether empathy has any place in an increasingly cruel and risky world. This paper discusses the role of empathy and the related notion of sympathy in a narrative that represents it in extreme circumstances. Is sympathy to be considered as a fundamental human trait in a world in which the permanence of all human values is being threatened by violence and cruelty? or can the creation of a new species through hybridization contribute a new definition of what is human?

Dans le roman graphique *Sweet Tooth* de Jeff Lemire, le lecteur se voit confronté à un monde en dissolution. La cause de cette catastrophe, une pandémie à l'échelle mondiale, est un élément traditionnel de la fiction dystopique. L'originalité de *Sweet Tooth* réside dans le fait que son protagoniste est particulièrement mal équipé pour affronter un monde de violence, soit parce qu'il est trop sensible ou trop vulnérable. En créant ce personnage, Lemire se pose la question de savoir si l'empathie peut encore exister dans un monde de plus en plus cruel et hostile. Cet article examine la fonction de l'empathie et de la notion voisine de sympathie dans cette œuvre, notamment dans des conditions extrêmes. Nous nous demanderons si la sympathie doit être envisagée comme un trait fondamentalement humain, dans un monde qui semble justement remettre en question les valeurs humaines traditionnelles, ou si au contraire l'apparition d'une nouvelle espèce hybride propose des perspectives insolites pour définir l'humain.

INDEX

Keywords: empathy, sympathy, graphic narrative, hybridity, humanism, Jeff Lemire
Mots-clés: empathie, sympathie, roman graphique, hybridité, humanisme, Jeff Lemire

AUTHOR

ANDRÉ CABRAL DE ALMEIDA CARDOSO

Universidade Federal Fluminense